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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 RANGOON 001224

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SUBJECT: SHOWDOWN AT THE ILO? GOB CAVALIER ON FORCED LABOR PROBLEMS

REF: A. RANGOON 1136

[1](#)B. RANGOON 676 AND PREVIOUS

Classified By: COM Carmen Martinez for Reasons 1.4 (b,d)

[1](#)1. (U) This is an action request. Please see para 11.

[1](#)2. (C) Summary: The ILO's Burma representative corroborates UNHCR reports of a "serious resurgence" in forced labor in Rakhine State. He adds that the GOB has dismissed all recent ILO interventions on forced labor and appears to be completely indifferent to potential countermeasures imposed by the international community. We've requested a meeting with the Minister of Labor to raise our concerns about these forced labor reports and alleged GOB complicity and to highlight potential repercussions for Burma at the November ILO Governing Board meeting. End Summary.

[1](#)3. (C) P/E chief met on September 8 with Richard Horsey, liaison officer for the International Labor Organization (ILO), to discuss recent reports of a surge in the use of forced labor in Rakhine State. Horsey not only corroborated the alarming reports we've heard from UNHCR and others sources (ref A), but assessed that the forced labor situation near the western border "is the most serious it has been in years."

[1](#)4. (C) Horsey said that the ILO first learned from independent sources in July that local military units in northern Rakhine State were rounding up villagers to rebuild six bridges in northern Maungdaw Township, near the border with Bangladesh. Military commanders required each nearby village to provide 45 persons per day to work on the project; villages unable to contribute labor were forced to offer cash payments to local authorities. The project contractor, who reportedly has close ties with SPDC military intelligence, provided small food packets or "minuscule" cash payments to some villagers, but most were uncompensated.

[1](#)5. (C) The ILO made a written intervention to the GOB on July 23, documenting the reports of forced labor in Rakhine State and requesting action to address the problem. Horsey noted that villagers forced to work on the bridges were unable to partake in the seasonal planting of rice, leading to food shortages and reduced family income. The GOB responded in late August that its "Convention 29 Implementing Committee" had dispatched a field observation team to Rakhine State and concluded that there was no merit to the reports of forced labor, "which appear to be nothing more than rumors spread by jealous contractors."

[1](#)6. (C) Horsey was not surprised by the GOB's flat denial. The ILO, he said, has made 35 interventions thus far this year to the GOB, documenting credible reports of forced labor throughout Burma. The GOB has responded to roughly two thirds of the inquiries, ignoring the remaining third, and denying in every case that any forced labor existed. In one egregious example, Horsey provided the GOB with a first-hand account of forced labor in Chin State, including photos of women and children working on a road project. The GOB acknowledged that the project existed, but claimed that all work was "mechanized" and required no human labor whatsoever.

[1](#)7. (C) In early September, Horsey met with the GOB's Interagency Implementing Committee on forced labor and raised the Rakhine reports as well as additional forced labor issues, including: the arrest of two individuals after they had filed forced labor complaints with the ILO office in Rangoon; the arrest of three individuals in southern Rakhine State after they had written the GOB with complaints of forced labor; and the ongoing court case of several Burmese convicted of treason for having contact with the ILO (ref B). Horsey said he had expected the GOB, facing a November ILO Governing Board meeting in Geneva, to be superficially cooperative or to at least take minimal efforts to stem the most blatant cases of forced labor. However, Horsey said, "the GOB is unconcerned about our reports and appears to be completely indifferent to potential ILO sanctions."
Comment: The Comfort Zone

[1](#)8. (C) Forced labor and other human rights abuses in Rakhine State, home to a significant portion of Burma's repressed Muslim minority, are not new phenomena. Such practices, condoned and encouraged by the GOB and the Burmese Armed

Forces, were a primary factor leading to the mass exodus of several hundred thousand ethnic Rohingyas who fled Burma into Bangladesh in the early 1990s. However, the presence of UN agencies and NGOs in the region, and corresponding pressure from the ILO since 2000, had until this year led to an overall decline in the use of forced labor.

19. (C) Local ILO staff acknowledge that the use of forced labor had declined overall throughout Burma, but conclude that such progress does not reflect the regime's desire to stem labor abuses and was simply a result of international pressure and a GOB effort to forestall punitive ILO action. According to ILO rep Horsey, the outstanding treason court case, the recent resurgence of forced labor practices, and the GOB's lack of response could very likely lead the ILO in November to reactivate a 2000 resolution calling on ILO members and affiliates to review relations with Burma. The ILO, he added, may also seek to invoke new and unprecedented measures under Article 33, such as discouraging foreign direct investment in Burma.

10. (C) We find this resurgence in forced labor incidents, and the GOB's cavalier attitude toward the possibility of ILO action, a further sign that a decline in pressure from ASEAN and others in the region has allowed the regime to feel increasingly secure in its political comfort zone. End Comment.

11. (C) Action Request: The Chief of Mission has requested a meeting with Minister of Labor, Tin Winn, to express our concern over the reports of forced labor in Rakhine State, including the alleged complicity of local government and military authorities. Post would appreciate, as background and additional talking points for this meeting, more information on the anticipated process at the November ILO meeting and potential measures directed at the GOB for its failure to stem forced labor practices. We understand that Burma discussions in Geneva are scheduled to take place on November 17 or 18. End action request.
Martinez